



3

*supportive teachers -
supportive contexts*
(best practices)

Teachers, Context, and the Comprehension Task

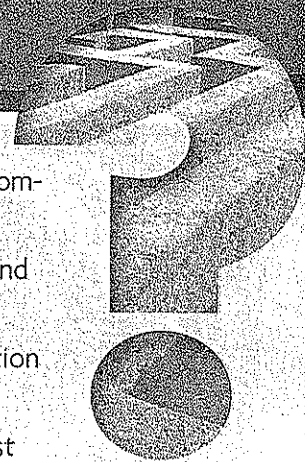
preview

This chapter continues the development of the comprehension first proposal by zeroing in on comprehension best practices. The bulk of the chapter outlines how best practices are linked to the five comprehension factors introduced in Chapter 1: learners, teachers (and teaching), tasks, texts, and context (look back to Ready Resource 1.2). Two of these factors—*supportive teachers* who create *supportive classroom contexts*—are discussed as “preconditions” that

set the stage for successful implementation of nine comprehension best practices.

All nine comprehension best practices are then introduced and two previously introduced practices are discussed in more detail. Those two practices are: (1) Teach the inquiry-based Comprehension Problem Solving process and (2) focus on big ideas (comprehension product). The remaining seven best practices are the subjects of subsequent chapters.

important questions



1. What are best practices, and where do they come from? How are they important to comprehension instruction?
2. How can knowing the five factors that influence comprehension help teachers plan and use best practices?
3. How do a teacher's personal knowledge and beliefs support or hamper implementation of best practices and subsequent student achievement?
4. Why is creating a supportive classroom a precondition for implementation of best practices?
5. How do big ideas and the CPS process relate to the task of comprehension?
6. What are ways to teach for big ideas?
7. What are instructional ideas for teaching the CPS process?

Introduction

Our chief want of life is somebody who shall make us do what we can.

RALPH WALDO EMERSON

The concept of best practice has its roots in "Progressive Education," envisioned by John Dewey, Maria Montessori, and Jean Piaget. Today, *best practices* are research-based curriculum and instructional design recommendations backed by evidence that shows they are likely to increase student achievement. They are also drawn from accumulated professional wisdom about instruction that achieves results (Allington, 2005b). Professional associations routinely endorse best practices and include them in standards documents (Daniels & Bizar, 2005). Identification of best comprehension practices that "generate long-term improvement . . . and thus promote learning across content areas" is "one of the nation's highest priorities" (RAND, 2002, p. xvi).

The idea of best practices is not without controversy. Reinking (2007) argues that the superlative "best" creates an obstacle, because it implies an absolute. I chose to use the label as it is generally understood. Best practices are the best ways we know to teach comprehension, *given our current knowledge base*. They are not written in stone. As famed economist John Maynard Keynes explained, "When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do?" As the research base about "what works" to increase comprehension grows, educators should follow Keynes' lead: they should accordingly change what is considered "best."

Many educators claim to use literacy reform models that include best practices. However, all too often schools and teachers may still rely on practices that hold little potential to increase comprehension (Cuban, 1993; Taylor et al., 1999). For example, in many schools the basal reader series still dominates instruction. The problem with these commercial sets of student books and teacher manuals is that they are published for mass consumption, not for particular students. Fur-

*Problem-based
reader
series.*

thermore, manuals do not teach; they outline procedures. Only a skilled teacher can creatively design and implement differentiated comprehension instruction tailored to individual strengths and needs. This is the instruction that produces comprehension success and what best practices are intended to achieve.

The International Reading Association (IRA), the best-known professional literacy organization in the world, used numerous large-scale research studies to craft a position statement on best practices. The statement should serve as an important guide for every school's comprehension curriculum and each teacher's instruction. It begins with, "We believe that there is no single method or single combination of methods that can successfully teach all children to read" and calls the search for one best way "futile." IRA recommends that teachers possess a "wide range of instructional methods and have strong knowledge of the children in their classrooms" (unpaged). IRA further recommends that teachers be in charge of deciding which methods to use and have the flexibility to modify instruction to meet specific student needs. (View the full IRA statement at their website.) Teachers caught in the web of scripted curricula and pacing guides should look for opportunities to share this and other important documents with administrators who may not have had the benefit of this information.

multiple
methods



Using Multiple Methods of Beginning Reading Instruction

<http://reading.org/General/AboutIRA/PositionStatements/MultipleMethodsPosition.aspx>



Artful Implementation of Best Practices

Many books have been written on the topic of best practices, but a single definition has yet to emerge. What's more, a definitive list of what will result in comprehension success for all children does not exist. We do, however, know about practices that promise high impact on comprehension. This book focuses on nine practices that reflect a consensus of opinion about what is most likely to cause changes in student achievement.

The comprehension practices recommended in this book are the antithesis of instruction that "stays inside the lines." As Tomlinson points out, approaches that equate teaching with following a script "fail teachers because they confuse technical expedience with artistry" (2000, p. 6). Students may "confuse compliance with thoughtful engagement" (p. 6). In contrast, practices such as teaching inquiry-based problem solving have the potential to provoke intense student thinking.

Some of the best practices described in the pages of this book reflect long-called-for changes. For example, response options congruent with 21st-century life are recommended as replacements for worksheets. Instead of writing out answers to literal-level questions at the ends of chapters it is recommended that students be involved in genuine conversations and discussions, and long-term projects that culminate in performances and exhibits that reflect comprehension. These practices hold strong prospects for deeply engaging students (Allington, 2002b, 2005b). Teachers are urged to substitute informed instructional improvisation for scripted lessons and to motivate students by tapping their innate desire to understand rather than by using extrinsic rewards such as grades, points, and coupons (Guthrie, 2004).

* Link to motivation

The word *artful* has to do with creating unique designs. Artful best practice results when teachers tap research, assessment data, and professional wisdom to solve instructional problems in unique ways that make sense for their particular students. Excellent teachers are always artful. They don't apply best practices in a uniform fashion, because doing so doesn't consider learner diversity. They design comprehension instruction creatively, on the basis of professional knowledge and skill, responding to all the factors that influence instruction (RAND, 2002).

Creative instructional design focuses on adjusting to the strengths and needs of individual students. In the following snapshot, teacher George Darcy is applying best practices research. As you observe his lesson, notice how he crafts an artful implementation, drawing on his own personality. Key teaching strategies he uses are highlighted in boldface.



classroom snapshot

GEORGE DARCY TEACHES CPS

George Darcy has been teaching fourth grade for seven years and implementing best practices research for three. He is interested in the expanded concept of *text* because he sees his students increasingly using technology-based communication. In an age of "new literacies" and "multi-literacies," he feels he needs to demonstrate how to make meaning of texts that reflect the real worlds of his students (Lotherington & Chow, 2006).

It is the second week of school, and today George is introducing the Comprehension Problem Solving process. Notice the impact of George's definition of comprehension and his personal teaching style. Some of the best practices George uses are

- engagement/motivational strategies.
- use of alternative texts.
- explicit modeling of thinking processes.
- use of response options for students to show understanding.

Before the Lesson

George is well aware of the role of engagement in motivation and the important impact of motivation on comprehension. That is why he begins the day with **warm-ups** that engage "head, heart, and hands" for learning. Today he is using a **group sing** strategy, with students standing in a circle. George is famous at his school for how he gets students to write songs, and today he is using songs written by last year's students to motivate his new class.

"See if you recognize the melody. It's from an old commercial. **Echo me**," directs George. He sings, "I'm a reader. You're a reader. He's a reader. She's a reader. Wouldn't you like to be a reader, too? Be a reader. Oooh, what a reader!" He stops after each line and waits for the echo. He also uses hand motions, pointing at himself and at different students. On the last line he throws up his hands and waves. Students imitate his actions. By the end they are smiling and laughing.

"Does anyone know the tune?" George asks.

"It sounds sorta familiar," a boy says.

"Well, it is a pretty old jingle. It's for soda—Dr Pepper," George explains.



"I've heard it," a girl says excitedly. "I'm a pepper. You're a pepper. He's a pepper. She's a pepper," she sings, and several other kids nod their heads in agreement.

"That's right, Julia," George grins. "Let's sing it again!" And they do, two more times with all the motions. George then explains that writing songs is a great way to pull your thinking together and that this song was written by a student from last year to express his thoughts about reading.

"Wow!" exclaims a boy. "I think I know him, because he did it with some other guys for our class."

"That's right," George says. "I forgot they went on tour! It's not hard to write songs. Maybe you'll want to go on tour, too." He smiles, but some students widen their eyes and grimace.

Lesson Introduction

"The important thing is to start with **something to write about**. Today I'm going to show you something that is very important about reading that we'll be using the whole year. You may be motivated to write a song about this special information. It's about how to comprehend or understand just about anything. In fact, this is a 'secret of the universe!'"

"What's a secret of the universe?" a girl asks.

"Well, secrets of the universe are **big ideas** about people and nature that are the most important things to know. That's why we'll be studying lots of secrets of the universe in science and social studies this year," explains George.

"That's awesome," another girl says. "How did you learn all the secrets?"

"I don't know all of them. I'm still learning, just like you. I love to keep finding more big ideas to teach my students. That is why I was so excited to learn about **the way good readers think**. I just learned it a few years ago, and I changed my teaching because of it," George confesses.

"Cool," says a boy.

"What is it?" asks another boy.

"Yeah! Tell us," says a girl.

Lesson Development

"Okay. Everyone take a seat, pretzel style," George says. "I'm going to show you how to read any text. **Text** is a word that means anything from which a person can get ideas. We can read paintings, music, and, yes, books."

"What about YouTube?" asks a boy.

"Yes, you can view videos and read any other type of information on the Internet using the process I'm going to show you," George explains. "Here is the thing. To understand any text, you have to **start with a purpose**. You have to really want to understand or make sense. This is the secret—good readers think every text is a problem to be solved, and they use a problem-solving process that you already know."

"We already know it?" a girl responds skeptically.

"Yes, you do this kind of thinking every day of your life. Let me just show you what I'm talking about," George says as he reaches around to grab an object covered with a black towel.

"What do you think is under the towel?" George asks.

"It looks like a box because of the shape," a boy says.

"It looks like a box of cereal," says another boy.

"You are absolutely right, Ricky!" George says. He pulls off the towel to expose a large box of Cheerios. "I'm going to show you the most important ways readers think when they read,

motivation

think aloud

and I'm going to do it by problem solving this text—the cereal box. It's like I'm letting you listen in on my brain.

"No way!" says a boy.

"I want to hear this," says another.

"Okay, here goes. Any reading begins with a problem or purpose. My problem is I'm worried about being healthy and eating better. I also need to lose a few inches," George says as he pinches his waist. "So, I went to the grocery and I started reading the 'texts' in the cereal aisle."

"You mean you read the cereal boxes?" a girl asks.

"That's exactly what I did. Cereal boxes are texts that contain lots of information," George explains. "Listen as I ask myself questions. I'll click the PowerPoint so you can see the questions under 'Before, During, and After' as I read the box. I'm going to do the whole thing so you can see what you'll be learning to do this year." George uses a remote to bring up the first slide, and he begins to talk through his reading of the Cheerios box. Ready Resource 3.1 shows his whole presentation, which takes about five minutes.

Cheerios box

Using CPS with alternative texts: Cheerios box.

BEFORE Reading and viewing

Purpose-set. Motivate with clear goals.

ASK MYSELF:

- What's the problem? Why am I reading this? *I want to find out if it is healthy so I can decide whether to buy it.*

Predict and connect (self, other texts, world). Overview the text and activate prior knowledge.

ASK MYSELF:

- What is the box like? How is it organized? *Bright color. Big title and brief information on front with more on back and most facts on side panel.*
- What do I already know about this problem or topic? *I've been hearing that Cheerios can reduce cholesterol. I've eaten them before, and I like the cereal. I'm thinking it will be fewer calories and carbs than the granola I've been eating.*
- What information might the box provide? *I'm expecting all the facts I need, but I expect there will be marketing hype, so I'll have to read the details carefully.*

DURING Data gathering by taking and making meaning

Determine important concepts. Use clues.

ASK MYSELF:

- What does the author want me to think? Why? *General Mills wants me to buy Cheerios, and they know "whole grains" are currently being hyped, so they put that right on the front. The company wants me to think Cheerios are good for my health, so there is a heart-shaped bowl on the front.*
- What do I think are key concepts or topics that may lead to big ideas? *Whole grain, lower cholesterol, happy heart, guaranteed, nutrition facts in four places.*

Continued.

- What evidence supports these ideas (facts or details)? *A serving of Cheerios has only 100 calories and 20 grams of carbohydrates. That is half the calories and more than half the carbs of my granola. I also see a cup has 25 percent of daily calcium, which I need for my bone problem.*

Infer conclusions. Use previous evidence to decide.

ASK MYSELF:

- What do I predict so far? *I'm inferring that I should buy and regularly eat the Cheerios. That should cause me to lose weight and be healthier.*

Image. Use your imagination to think about the text.

- What visual images can I make in my head? *I can see the little oat circles floating in white milk in my green bowl on the sunroom table.*
- What feelings, smells, tastes, and sounds am I connecting to the text? *I start to salivate and taste the crunch of the Cheerios, the soft bananas, and the creamy milk.*

Question and wonder. Ask yourself the 5 W + H questions.

ASK MYSELF:

- What predictions are confirmed? Rejected? What are new predictions and connections? *Cheerios does seem to be a better buy for my health, as I predicted. However, I'm wondering if it will taste as good as my granola.*

Monitor. Check whether it is all making sense.

ASK MYSELF:

- Is this making sense? If not, how can I make it make sense? *I'm not sure what all the ingredients are. What is "tripotassium phosphate"? I can use my Word Fix-Ups: I see the prefix tri, which I know means three, like in tricycle. I can pronounce both words. However, I don't know the meaning just because I can say them. OK, I'll try my computer pocket dictionary, but, nope, neither word is in it. I'll check the Internet when I get home, or I'm thinking Cheerios has a good reputation, so I'll probably just trust that this ingredient is a good thing.*

Analyze/critique. Zoom in—Zoom out. Notice text features and structures.

ASK MYSELF:

- If the text is narrative: What do you know about the characters? What are the problems? Where and when is the story happening? How are problems being resolved? What themes are emerging? *The Cheerios box is not a story, for sure!*
- If the text is expository: How is it organized (e.g., sequential, cause-effect, comparison)? *It is expository, because it gives information about lots of causes and effects if you eat Cheerios.*
- If the text is non-verbal: What stands out? How does the text feel? Why? *There is a lot of visual art—color, the design, photographs, the heart shape of the bowl.*
- Overall, ask, "What are the important details and features? How are they related to the big ideas I'm finding and creating?" *The idea that Cheerios is whole grain is repeated many times on the box and highlighted with a big check mark. I also notice that lots of vitamins have been added, but that may be true of my granola. I'll have to check. I do notice the front of the box is dominated by an ad for a free*

(continued)

Using CPS with alternative texts, continued.

cereal bowl shaped like a speed racer. This annoys me, because I know this will cause kids to nag their parents into sending for this. I do like the familiar yellow box, which has a sunny feel overall.

Incubate. Take time out.

ASK MYSELF:

- How can I take a break so I can review and reconsider from a fresh perspective? *I decide to go get my canned goods and have a cup of coffee. Then I'll come back for the cereal if I still want it. I do still have lots of granola left at home.*

Synthesize. Pull big ideas together.

ASK MYSELF:

- What are the most important concepts, themes or generalizations, and conclusions? *I'm concluding that buying a whole grain low-calorie food is a good choice.*
- What big idea statements are most important? *I decide I really do need to lose ten pounds, so I should buy the healthy Cheerios and get into a routine of eating healthy foods.*

AFTER *Reading and viewing*

Organize and shape. Transform the big ideas.

ASK MYSELF:

- How can I best show my understanding of the most important big ideas? *I put two boxes in my cart, because I see they are on a buy-one-get-one-free sale.*

Reflect and revise. Think about the comprehension product.

ASK MYSELF:

- What works or makes sense? What doesn't work?
- How can I make it better? *I'm happy with my decision, and I look forward to telling my wife.*

Publish. Make comprehension visible.

ASK MYSELF:

- How can I share my comprehension "product"? With whom? When? Where? *I'll surprise my wife with my diet plan, using Cheerios in the morning.*

The students look astounded.

"What did you notice?" George asks after he finishes going through the PowerPoint presentation.

"It is a lot to think about," whispers a girl.

"It is, but you do this kind of thinking all the time," George explains.

"We do?" asks a boy.

"Yes. It is problem solving to make sense of printed texts that have words and also what are called non-verbal texts. It's all about active thinking," George explains.

"There are a lot of questions," observes a girl.

Lesson Conclusion

"There are. I'm going to put up a chart in the room that shows all the questions in the Power-Point. I have a bookmark for each of you with the same questions," George says as he reaches in a bag and pulls out a handful of bookmarks.

"When do we get them?" asks a girl.

"Well, right now!" says George. "But, one thing. I want you to know we'll be working on this all year, every day with every text. We'll study each of these kinds of thinking and the questions until everyone can do the problem solving well."

"I want a red one," says a girl.

"Look, they are coated with plastic," says a boy as George hands them out.

"So we can wipe them off when you sneeze," giggles a girl.

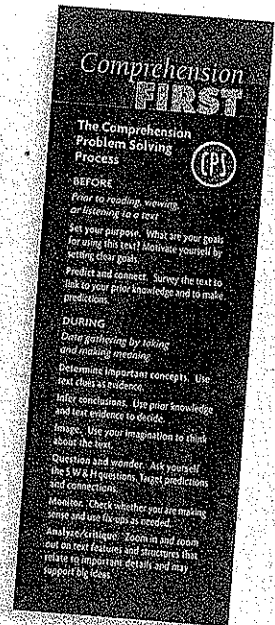
George laughs and then says, "We'll start right after recess with the BEFORE strategies."

"What are strategies?" asks a boy.

"Secrets of the universe?" asks another boy.

"Great questions, boys," George says. "I'll answer them right after recess, too."

Postscript: George is as good as his word. He not only explains that strategies are ways people solve problems, but he shows his students *how* to use the CPS strategies with verbal and non-verbal, print and non-print texts related to science, social studies, math, and literature. It does indeed take the entire year, but George's students become adept at using the strategies to think about big ideas in content units and in their own lives. They also write lots of songs. Many are about the CPS process and are taken on the road and performed for other classes, the PTO, and the local Rotary Club. Ready Resource 3.2 gives an example of a student rap.



Example student rap.

The CPS Rap

Purpose-set/Motivate, Predict/Connect, Cogitate

Question Question Question Question

What's the big idea?

Data Gather, Infer and Image, Check Predictions, Use Fix-Ups

Question Question Question Question

What's the big idea?

Zoom In, Zoom out, Incubate, Synthesize, Give It Shape

Question Question Question Question

What's the big idea?

Reflect/Revise, Make It Great, Show the Public, Celebrate!

Question Question Question Question

What's the big idea?

READY
RESOURCE
3.2

The Five Factors and Best Practice Implementation

Interest in comprehension research has grown steadily in recent decades. A flood of studies has yielded a description of the cognitive actions and emotional responses that successful comprehenders use (see references in Chapter 2). George Darcy is among the teachers who now use research-based teaching practices that are considered to be the *best path at this time* to increasing comprehension. Acquiring a repertoire of best comprehension teaching practices is essential to a teacher's pre-service preparation as well as ongoing professional development (RAND, 2002).

Like his colleagues, George faces the task of implementing these findings in an actual classroom context where learners will have diverse needs (NRP, 2000). Research-based answers are not available for every variable in teaching comprehension, so practitioners have to be problem solvers. As John Guthrie explains, there are "points in history—and this is one of them—[when] the urgency of improving reading becomes too compelling to wait for researchers to catch up . . . practice must lead research" (2007, p. xx). George Darcy seems to relish the challenge of making the complex task of comprehension manageable and enjoyable.

Using categories helps to make it easier to understand the complexities of crafting the best comprehension instruction possible. Chapter 1 introduced five categories that most influence comprehension success. The Five Factors are the particular nature or characteristics of learners, tasks, texts, the context, and teachers/teaching. Based on each factor, we can generate questions to guide planning that results in differentiated instruction, which is key to making comprehension practices "best" for specific students. Here are examples of planning questions:

1. *Learners*: What strengths and needs do students have that may relate to comprehension?
2. *Tasks*: What does the act of comprehension require (process and product)? What outcomes can be expected if comprehension is successful?
3. *Texts*: What are the most appropriate materials to use to increase students' comprehension?
4. *Context*: When, where, and with whom will my students comprehend best? What classroom conditions support comprehending and comprehension?
5. *Teaching*: What instructional strategies are most likely to cause students to increase their comprehension? How should instruction be organized to foster comprehension?

We teachers join writers, scientists, and artists when we use this kind of questioning to set problem solving in motion to create a purposeful design. Notice that the lesson design process parallels the Comprehension Problem Solving process. When teachers use this process to address literacy needs (see Ready Resource 1.3), they do more than implement a fixed concept of "best"

practice. Indeed, best practice is about custom design. As teachers, we need to reject rigid thinking and stale practices that have not worked. Inventional thinking is needed to meet 21st-century demands. It is ultimately the individual teacher who creates instruction for students. Whether that instruction is "best," "good," or even "bad" begins with the teacher. That is why the influence of teachers is a precondition for best practice implementation.

Preconditions for Best Practice Implementation

*supportive teachers
supportive learning context.*



his section examines two preconditions that set the stage for successful implementation of comprehension practices: *supportive teachers* and a *supportive learning context*.

PRECONDITION #1: SUPPORTIVE TEACHERS

You've got to be careful if you don't know where you're going, 'cause you might not get there.

YOGI BERRA

Knowledge and beliefs that support

A teacher's vision is a "deciding force" in comprehension (Gambrell, Malloy, & Mazzoni, 2007, p. 17). What a teacher knows and believes about literacy determines his or her instructional vision. Students need teachers who support a 21st-century view of literacy. The teacher who defines literacy as effective communication using a range of verbal (word-based) and non-verbal (wordless) texts makes instructional decisions based on that definition. Such a teacher is likely to teach students how to mine picture book art for meaning as readily as he coaches students to attend to words. The teacher who believes reading is synonymous with comprehension isn't satisfied with accurate and speedy pronunciation of words. He will budget time for work on vocabulary and fluency, but these sub-skills will not dominate the literacy block and will be clearly presented as tools to reach the goal of comprehension. Teachers who know how to teach problem-solving strategies for meaning making set the comprehension bar higher than teachers who rely on post-reading questions that ask only for recall of facts.

*definition
21st cent. view*

Teacher quality is center stage

Teachers are front and center in any intervention plan likely to change comprehension achievement (RAND, 2002). In an extensive review of research, Darling-Hammond (2000) found that teacher quality and expertise consistently and accurately predicted student achievement. As much as 43 percent of variance in student achievement can be attributed to teacher quality (Ferguson,

style; personality; desire to learn; strategic thinker

1991). Teacher knowledge and expertise is a "critical variable in student achievement" (RAND, 2002, p. 43). Since most students are in the regular classroom 80 to 85 percent of the day, generalist teachers are on the front line for learners who struggle. Unfortunately, paraprofessionals have been found to have "no positive effect on academic achievement" when they deliver interventions (Allington & Baker, 2007, p. 50).

Since students who receive "high quality teaching" can have a 40 percent achievement advantage over students who receive lower-quality instruction (Allington & Baker, 2007, p. 86), excellent instruction by well-trained teachers is the most promising means of increasing comprehension achievement and preventing comprehension problems (RAND, 2002). What does "quality" include? The following are teacher qualities that support students' comprehension development.

Style. All instruction is grounded in the vision, knowledge, personality, and experiences of individual teachers. Teaching practice should be both science and art. It starts with individual teachers who design instruction for specific students, using the best ideas research and professional wisdom currently have to offer. They twist and tweak, modify, combine, and elaborate on best practices information to suit their students' needs. Then they top it all off with an original implementation that reflects their own strengths. Such teachers have what writers and artists call "style." But, just like students, teachers also need skill and will. They need a solid knowledge base to support comprehension reforms, and they need to *want* to make change.

For example, teachers who present themselves as comprehension "masters" (e.g., those who use personal examples to demonstrate CPS) support student learning through example. These teachers walk the talk. Students choose to apprentice themselves to teachers who (1) show they have the "stuff" to support the learning needed to succeed outside of school and (2) use a unique teaching style to deliver substance. This combination of style and substance creates strong support for effective comprehension instruction. That is why teachers are center stage in a 21st-century design of comprehension and composition instruction (Gambrell, Malloy, & Mazzoni, 2007).

Personality. There is no substitute for enthusiasm, humor, and an optimistic orientation toward life when it comes to supporting comprehension best practices. Students know when a teacher enjoys helping them learn. While people cannot totally change their personalities, teachers can choose to be positive during the school day. At times, being positive simply demands good acting. So be it. If necessary, teachers can practice "method acting," artificially creating an emotion on the outside, which produces the emotion on the inside. Changing the outside works. Smiling engages facial muscles that trigger happy hormones (Cornett, 2002). As the sign says below a large mirror in the Toledo Board of Education building, "How would you like to look at yourself all day?"

Desire to learn. A teacher's personal desire to grow and learn is foundational to comprehension best practice implementation. The most effective teachers always say that they have more to learn. They seek out research that suggests more

effective practices, and they delight in professional development opportunities. On the other hand, weaker teachers are often confident that they know it all and may even resist professional development (Pressley, 2006). This attitude does not support implementation of evolving conclusions about best practices.

Reflective strategic thinkers. A teacher's personal reading and learning habits do affect his or her instructional practice. For example, teachers who read a lot have experiences that allow them to explain and model strategic comprehension. The best teachers are practitioners; they can do well what they are employed to teach their students to do. In the case of comprehension, this means personal use of Comprehension Problem Solving strategies with diverse texts.

Teachers who consult their own reading, listening, and viewing habits have a profound advantage. No teacher can understand comprehension without reflecting on his or her own thinking, and an understanding of comprehension process and product is what teachers need in order to model CPS for students. Personal literacy expertise also frees teachers to deviate from the script. They can use teachable moments to share poignant personal, real-life examples of CPS use, ranging from trying to make sense of the directions for an iPod to trying to comprehend the big ideas in the ABBA song "Thank You for the Music."

Teachers who are skilled and enthusiastic learners are less dependent on teacher guides to chart the course of lessons, and no manual can ever respond to a learner's search for meaning in a picture book, novel, or historical event the way a real live teacher can. In particular, personal readership prepares teachers to fashion both personal growth plans and instructional designs that can revolutionize students' comprehension achievement. Like Charlotte in *Charlotte's Web*, each teacher can use her or his innate problem-solving capabilities to craft a comprehension magnum opus. Such a great work results from a continuing focus on big ideas and important questions related to literacy and learning.

Teachers as readers

We can't teach what we don't know or can't do. To help students comprehend texts, teachers need to know and personally use the set of strategies successful comprehenders use. By raising her self-awareness of how meaning is constructed, a teacher can gain important insights that inform instructional decisions. Successful comprehenders often are not *conscious* of their strategy use, but teachers don't have that luxury. Reflection on personal use of CPS strategies, with a focus on big ideas, helps the teacher make sense of the tangled web of research, teacher's manuals, standards, and tests. The perspective of ourselves as learners allows us to consider the logic of research implications. The Self-Assessment that follows is intended to raise awareness of personal strategy use.

CPS self-assessment. The self-assessment in Ready Resource 3.3 is based on the CPS process, as summarized in Chapter 2, Ready Resource 2.1. The purpose of the assessment is to scaffold reflections on how you personally problem solve to make meaning. As you respond to the questions, try to "think about yourself thinking." You may discover you use most of the strategies, but you may not have known

you were doing so or even have known there are specific labels for all the different ways we think about text. Some questions will be easier, and these probably reflect strategies you'll be most comfortable modeling for students. Before teaching strategies that are less familiar, you can target them for personal study.

If this first self-assessment stretches you, take heart that successful comprehenders often are not conscious of strategy use. I suggest you think back to a recent experience with reading, listening, or viewing a text. You may also practice with a text as you move through the questions. The text can be this book, the Internet, a film, a radio program, a cartoon, a newspaper article, or even a soup can. After you complete the self-assessment, proceed to the next paragraph.

apply to
homework
assignment
↓
understand
class-
easy, hard

Comprehension self-assessment.

Use the following items to reflect on your use of CPS strategies and to set goals. To what degree do you . . .

- 1** Start with a clear purpose for using the text? (e.g., to derive pleasure or to get specific information)
- 2** Do an overview of the text to predict its content and organization, especially as it connects to your background and needs? (e.g., read the back cover, skim the table of contents)
- 3** Gather key ideas from the text by both *extracting* meaning and *constructing* your own sense? (e.g., zero in on stated themes, draw your own conclusions)
- 4** Infer the most important ideas by using text evidence? (i.e., use facts and details to draw conclusions about characters, events, issues, etc.)
- 5** Think about what the author wants you to think? (i.e., try to get inside the author's head to see his or her perspective)
- 6** Construct mental images related to the text? (i.e., visualize and use other senses to make the text come alive)
- 7** Periodically spiral back to recall your original purposes for using the text and to confirm, reject, or create predictions? (e.g., you may discontinue reading a book that isn't enjoyable, if enjoyment was your original purpose)
- 8** Monitor whether the text is making sense and then take specific actions if it is not? (e.g., use word-solving strategies to decode unknown words, use comprehension fix-ups such as rereading to repair misunderstanding)
- 9** Zoom in and zoom out to notice text features (e.g., graphs, pictures, headings) and structures (e.g., story elements and paragraph structures) that help you see what's most important?
- 10** Take breaks to review and reconsider what's most important in the text? (e.g., play music, eat a snack, or take a walk and then return with a fresh outlook)
- 11** Synthesize the most important ideas? (i.e., pull together what seems to percolate to the top, such as prominent emotions and messages)
- 12** Shape the most important text-based ideas to fit your purposes? (e.g., summarize relevant ideas in the form of a list of questions for a book discussion, a sketch, a poem, etc.)
- 13** Reflect on your comprehension product (from #12) and revise to make it better?
- 14** Share your big ideas from texts with others? (anything from a blog post to a formal presentation at a conference)

Post-assessment. You may want to repeat the self-assessment by thinking of a different text experience, such as a film, a painting, or a piece of music. This will help you understand how the text itself and the circumstances change your responses. Also, consider repeating the assessment periodically, noticing your changing awareness and focus on strategies.

The bookmark on the back cover of this book is another tool to increase your strategy awareness. You may want to cut it out and use the prompts periodically with any reading, including this text. Stopping to reflect on strategies during reading is an effective way to boost your consciousness of strategy use. You may find that focusing attention on strategy use distracts from comprehension, as is true during the learning of any new procedure. It can feel awkward. This activity provides insight into the task we are asking students to do and serves as a reminder that strategy use is not the end goal—comprehension of big ideas is the desired outcome.

The cause of comprehension instructional reform is a great one. It depends on teachers who can support student comprehension growth with their own personal knowledge and beliefs. The self-study of personal strategies is an important component of being a supportive teacher.

STOP HERE

PRECONDITION #2: SUPPORTIVE LEARNING CONTEXT

The "place" of learning deeply affects learners and learning. John Dewey (1997) acknowledged this big idea when he recommended that classrooms be aesthetically stimulating. He even went further to point out that if classrooms are not "aesthetic," they must be the opposite: "anesthetic." Picture an anesthetic classroom that dulls the senses with stark walls and straight rows. Students hump over workbooks and slump at desks, all facing forward. Contrast this image with a room full of original student art and carpeted spaces where students gather in small groups for conversation and discussion. One environment seems to discourage, the other encourage. One environment numbs, the other excites and invites.

Implementation of comprehension best practices cannot be separated from the classroom ecology. The physical environment, the psychological impact, and the general culture of a place alter how we respond. Places can intimidate or liberate thoughts and feelings. Successful implementation of comprehension best practices depends on environments that support inquiry-based problem solving.

Supporting comprehension with an inviting culture

According to Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory, substantive learning is an active and constructive task very much influenced by the context. Instruction does not happen in a vacuum. Where and with whom one learns matters a great deal. For example, consider the influences on conversations in different locations (e.g., faculty lounge; college classroom; dorm room; church, synagogue, or mosque).

Each context has a culture that governs how people think, believe, and act while they are in it. Culture is basically a shared way of living, but it also means

a medium for growing things. Both meanings have relevance as we think about creating classrooms that support comprehension best practice implementation.

The dominating influence in classroom culture is psychological and is controlled by the teacher's personal dispositions, rules, and relationships with students. Teachers have great power. Of course, they can humiliate and hurt, but these behaviors do not support student comprehension growth. A culture of respect and invitation is needed. Such a culture is marked by a climate that uplifts students by elevating learning to personal inquiry.

Physical features of classrooms are also key to an ecology that supports comprehension. For example, the physical space can support or inhibit dialogue, conversation, and discussion, which are key features in any comprehension instruction reform proposal (Graves, Juel, & Graves, 2007). I think of my grandmother's breakfast nook, where all manner of topics were discussed. To earn a place at that table became my ardent childhood desire. It is that feeling created by heads inclined toward each other in talk punctuated by laughter and sometimes tears that I envisioned each year as I set up my classroom.

Comprehension thrives in an aesthetic environment that stimulates the senses, causes students to want to be there, and motivates by offering support for taking risks, making choices, and responding to texts in diverse ways. Aesthetically stimulating schools and classrooms provide settings that provoke curiosity, surprise, and a sense of mystery. Murals line walls, clouds are painted on ceiling tiles, plants abound. A classroom should offer bright, carpeted areas, grouped desks, and comfortable places to sit. Soft background music sets mood and can create relaxed alertness. Unique art "texts" created by students should be displayed at their eye level and substituted for less interesting teacher-made or store-bought decorations. Boxes of children's books, organized by unit, genre, and level, often dot the room. Most important, a feeling of intensity emanates from the joy of discovery produced by an inquiry orientation. This means that classrooms buzz with activity as students move about. Teachers laugh, sing, and express delight as students take risks to make discoveries and experience how exhilarating comprehension can be.

Teachers have it within their power to create a positive, supportive context for comprehension development. Think about a classroom familiar to you:

- How does the physical environment contribute to or detract from support for comprehension? (e.g., desk arrangement, displays, organization of materials)
- How does the psychological climate contribute to or impede comprehension? Is the climate aesthetic (stimulating) or anesthetic (stultifying or threatening)?
- How does the teacher's disposition influence the climate?
- How do social relationships among students affect text comprehension? (e.g., influence of high-status students)

Based on their individual personalities and their beliefs about learning (philosophy), teachers can create an invitational climate that supports student construction of meaning. An invitational climate reflects a culture that cel-